

CHAPTER XXVII. A SUPPER PARTY AT THE SAVOY

THE supper party given by Mr. Julius Hersheimmer to a few friends on the evening of the 30th will long be remembered in catering circles. It took place in a private room, and Mr. Hersheimmer's orders were brief and forcible. He gave *carte blanche*--and when a millionaire gives *carte blanche* he usually gets it!

Every delicacy out of season was duly provided. Waiters carried bottles of ancient and royal vintage with loving care. The floral decorations defied the seasons, and fruits of the earth as far apart as May and November found themselves miraculously side by side. The list of guests was small and select. The American Ambassador, Mr. Carter, who had taken the liberty, he said, of bringing an old friend, Sir William Beresford, with him, Archdeacon Cowley, Dr. Hall, those two youthful adventurers, Miss Prudence Cowley and Mr. Thomas Beresford, and last, but not least, as guest of honour, Miss Jane Finn.

Julius had spared no pains to make Jane's appearance a success. A mysterious knock had brought Tuppence to the door of the apartment she was sharing with the American girl. It was Julius. In his hand he held a cheque.

"Say, Tuppence," he began, "will you do me a good turn? Take this, and get Jane regularly togged up for this evening. You're all coming to supper with me at the Savoy. See? Spare no expense. You get me?"

"Sure thing," mimicked Tuppence. "We shall enjoy ourselves. It will be a pleasure dressing Jane. She's the loveliest thing I've ever seen."

"That's so," agreed Mr. Hersheimmer fervently.

His fervour brought a momentary twinkle to Tuppence's eye.

"By the way, Julius," she remarked demurely, "I--haven't given you my answer yet."

"Answer?" said Julius. His face paled.

"You know--when you asked me to--marry you," faltered Tuppence, her eyes downcast in the true manner of the early Victorian heroine, "and wouldn't take no for an answer. I've thought it well over----"

"Yes?" said Julius. The perspiration stood on his forehead.

Tuppence relented suddenly.

"You great idiot!" she said. "What on earth induced you to do it? I could see at the time you didn't care a twopenny dip for me!"

"Not at all. I had--and still have--the highest sentiments of esteem and respect--and admiration for you----"

"H'm!" said Tuppence. "Those are the kind of sentiments that very soon go to the wall when the other sentiment comes along! Don't they, old thing?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Julius stiffly, but a large and burning blush overspread his countenance.

"Shucks!" retorted Tuppence. She laughed, and closed the door, reopening it to add with dignity: "Morally, I shall always consider I have been jilted!"

"What was it?" asked Jane as Tuppence rejoined her.

"Julius."

"What did he want?"

"Really, I think, he wanted to see you, but I wasn't going to let him. Not until to-night, when you're going to burst upon every one like King Solomon in his glory! Come on! WE'RE GOING TO SHOP!"

To most people the 29th, the much-heralded "Labour Day," had passed much as any other day. Speeches were made in the Park and Trafalgar Square. Straggling processions, singing the Red Flag, wandered through the streets in a more or less aimless manner. Newspapers which had hinted at a general strike, and the inauguration of a reign of terror, were forced to hide their diminished heads. The bolder and more astute among them sought to prove that peace had been effected by following their counsels. In the Sunday papers a brief notice of the sudden death of Sir James Peel Edgerton, the famous K.C., had appeared. Monday's paper dealt appreciatively with the dead man's career. The exact manner of his sudden death was never made public.

Tommy had been right in his forecast of the situation. It had been a one-man show. Deprived of their chief, the organization fell to pieces. Kramenin had made

a precipitate return to Russia, leaving England early on Sunday morning. The gang had fled from Astley Priors in a panic, leaving behind, in their haste, various damaging documents which compromised them hopelessly. With these proofs of conspiracy in their hands, aided further by a small brown diary taken from the pocket of the dead man which had contained a full and damning resume of the whole plot, the Government had called an eleventh-hour conference. The Labour leaders were forced to recognize that they had been used as a cat's paw. Certain concessions were made by the Government, and were eagerly accepted. It was to be Peace, not War!

But the Cabinet knew by how narrow a margin they had escaped utter disaster. And burnt in on Mr. Carter's brain was the strange scene which had taken place in the house in Soho the night before.

He had entered the squalid room to find that great man, the friend of a lifetime, dead--betrayed out of his own mouth. From the dead man's pocket-book he had retrieved the ill-omened draft treaty, and then and there, in the presence of the other three, it had been reduced to ashes.... England was saved!

And now, on the evening of the 30th, in a private room at the Savoy, Mr. Julius P. Hersheimer was receiving his guests.

Mr. Carter was the first to arrive. With him was a choleric-looking old gentleman, at sight of whom Tommy flushed up to the roots of his hair. He came forward.

"Ha!" said the old gentleman, surveying him apoplectically. "So you're my nephew, are you? Not much to look at--but you've done good work, it seems. Your mother must have brought you up well after all. Shall we let bygones be bygones, eh? You're my heir, you know; and in future I propose to make you an allowance--and you can look upon Chalmers Park as your home."

"Thank you, sir, it's awfully decent of you."

"Where's this young lady I've been hearing such a lot about?"

Tommy introduced Tuppence.

"Ha!" said Sir William, eyeing her. "Girls aren't what they used to be in my young days."

"Yes, they are," said Tuppence. "Their clothes are different, perhaps, but they themselves are just the same."

"Well, perhaps you're right. Minxes then--minxes now!"

"That's it," said Tuppence. "I'm a frightful minx myself."

"I believe you," said the old gentleman, chuckling, and pinched her ear in high good-humour. Most young women were terrified of the "old bear," as they termed him. Tuppence's pertness delighted the old misogynist.

Then came the timid archdeacon, a little bewildered by the company in which he found himself, glad that his daughter was considered to have distinguished herself, but unable to help glancing at her from time to time with nervous apprehension. But Tuppence behaved admirably. She forbore to cross her legs, set a guard upon her tongue, and steadfastly refused to smoke.

Dr. Hall came next, and he was followed by the American Ambassador.

"We might as well sit down," said Julius, when he had introduced all his guests to each other. "Tuppence, will you----"

He indicated the place of honour with a wave of his hand.

But Tuppence shook her head.

"No--that's Jane's place! When one thinks of how she's held out all these years, she ought to be made the queen of the feast to-night."

Julius flung her a grateful glance, and Jane came forward shyly to the allotted seat. Beautiful as she had seemed before, it was as nothing to the loveliness that now went fully adorned. Tuppence had performed her part faithfully. The model gown supplied by a famous dressmaker had been entitled "A tiger lily." It was all golds and reds and browns, and out of it rose the pure column of the girl's white throat, and the bronze masses of hair that crowned her lovely head. There was admiration in every eye, as she took her seat.

Soon the supper party was in full swing, and with one accord Tommy was called upon for a full and complete explanation.

"You've been too darned close about the whole business," Julius accused him. "You let on to me that you were off to the Argentine--though I guess you had your reasons for that. The idea of both you and Tuppence casting me for the part of Mr. Brown just tickles me to death!"

"The idea was not original to them," said Mr. Carter gravely. "It was suggested, and the poison very carefully instilled, by a past-master in the art. The paragraph in the New York paper suggested the plan to him, and by means of it he wove a web that nearly enmeshed you fatally."

"I never liked him," said Julius. "I felt from the first that there was something wrong about him, and I always suspected that it was he who silenced Mrs. Vandemeyer so appositely. But it wasn't till I heard that the order for Tommy's execution came right on the heels of our interview with him that Sunday that I began to tumble to the fact that he was the big bug himself."

"I never suspected it at all," lamented Tuppence. "I've always thought I was so much cleverer than Tommy--but he's undoubtedly scored over me handsomely."

Julius agreed.

"Tommy's been the goods this trip! And, instead of sitting there as dumb as a fish, let him banish his blushes, and tell us all about it."

"Hear! hear!"

"There's nothing to tell," said Tommy, acutely uncomfortable. "I was an awful mug--right up to the time I found that photograph of Annette, and realized that she was Jane Finn. Then I remembered how persistently she had shouted out that word 'Marguerite'--and I thought of the pictures, and--well, that's that. Then of course I went over the whole thing to see where I'd made an ass of myself."

"Go on," said Mr. Carter, as Tommy showed signs of taking refuge in silence once more.

"That business about Mrs. Vandemeyer had worried me when Julius told me about it. On the face of it, it seemed that he or Sir James must have done the trick. But I didn't know which. Finding that photograph in the drawer, after that story of how it had been got from him by Inspector Brown, made me suspect Julius. Then I remembered that it was Sir James who had discovered the false Jane Finn. In the end, I couldn't make up my mind--and just decided to take no chances either way. I left a note for Julius, in case he was Mr. Brown, saying I was off to the Argentine, and I dropped Sir James's letter with the offer of the job by the desk so that he would see it was a genuine stunt. Then I wrote my letter to Mr. Carter and rang up Sir James. Taking him into my confidence would be the best thing either way, so I told him everything except where I believed the papers

to be hidden. The way he helped me to get on the track of Tuppence and Annette almost disarmed me, but not quite. I kept my mind open between the two of them. And then I got a bogus note from Tuppence--and I knew!"

"But how?"

Tommy took the note in question from his pocket and passed it round the table.

"It's her handwriting all right, but I knew it wasn't from her because of the signature. She'd never spell her name 'Twopence,' but anyone who'd never seen it written might quite easily do so. Julius HAD seen it--he showed me a note of hers to him once--but SIR JAMES HADN'T! After that everything was plain sailing. I sent off Albert post-haste to Mr. Carter. I pretended to go away, but doubled back again. When Julius came bursting up in his car, I felt it wasn't part of Mr. Brown's plan--and that there would probably be trouble. Unless Sir James was actually caught in the act, so to speak, I knew Mr. Carter would never believe it of him on my bare word----"

"I didn't," interposed Mr. Carter ruefully.

"That's why I sent the girls off to Sir James. I was sure they'd fetch up at the house in Soho sooner or later. I threatened Julius with the revolver, because I wanted Tuppence to repeat that to Sir James, so that he wouldn't worry about us. The moment the girls were out of sight I told Julius to drive like hell for London, and as we went along I told him the whole story. We got to the Soho house in plenty of time and met Mr. Carter outside. After arranging things with him we went in and hid behind the curtain in the recess. The policemen had orders to say, if they were asked, that no one had gone into the house. That's all."

And Tommy came to an abrupt halt.

There was silence for a moment.

"By the way," said Julius suddenly, "you're all wrong about that photograph of Jane. It WAS taken from me, but I found it again."

"Where?" cried Tuppence.

"In that little safe on the wall in Mrs. Vandemeyer's bedroom."

"I knew you found something," said Tuppence reproachfully. "To tell you the truth, that's what started me off suspecting you. Why didn't you say?"

"I guess I was a mite suspicious too. It had been got away from me once, and I determined I wouldn't let on I'd got it until a photographer had made a dozen copies of it!"

"We all kept back something or other," said Tuppence thoughtfully. "I suppose secret service work makes you like that!"

In the pause that ensued, Mr. Carter took from his pocket a small shabby brown book.

"Beresford has just said that I would not have believed Sir James Peel Edgerton to be guilty unless, so to speak, he was caught in the act. That is so. Indeed, not until I read the entries in this little book could I bring myself fully to credit the amazing truth. This book will pass into the possession of Scotland Yard, but it will never be publicly exhibited. Sir James's long association with the law would make it undesirable. But to you, who know the truth, I propose to read certain passages which will throw some light on the extraordinary mentality of this great man."

He opened the book, and turned the thin pages.

"... It is madness to keep this book. I know that. It is documentary evidence against me. But I have never shrunk from taking risks. And I feel an urgent need for self-expression.... The book will only be taken from my dead body...."

"... From an early age I realized that I had exceptional abilities. Only a fool underestimates his capabilities. My brain power was greatly above the average. I know that I was born to succeed. My appearance was the only thing against me. I was quiet and insignificant--utterly nondescript...."

"... When I was a boy I heard a famous murder trial. I was deeply impressed by the power and eloquence of the counsel for the defence. For the first time I entertained the idea of taking my talents to that particular market.... Then I studied the criminal in the dock.... The man was a fool--he had been incredibly, unbelievably stupid. Even the eloquence of his counsel was hardly likely to save him. I felt an immeasurable contempt for him.... Then it occurred to me that the criminal standard was a low one. It was the wastrels, the failures, the general riff-raff of civilization who drifted into crime.... Strange that men of brains had never realized its extraordinary opportunities.... I played with the idea.... What a magnificent field--what unlimited possibilities! It made my brain reel...."

"... I read standard works on crime and criminals. They all confirmed my opinion. Degeneracy, disease--never the deliberate embracing of a career by a far-seeing man. Then I considered. Supposing my utmost ambitions were realized--that I was called to the bar, and rose to the height of my profession? That I entered politics--say, even, that I became Prime Minister of England? What then? Was that power? Hampered at every turn by my colleagues, fettered by the democratic system of which I should be the mere figurehead! No--the power I dreamed of was absolute! An autocrat! A dictator! And such power could only be obtained by working outside the law. To play on the weaknesses of human nature, then on the weaknesses of nations--to get together and control a vast organization, and finally to overthrow the existing order, and rule! The thought intoxicated me....

"... I saw that I must lead two lives. A man like myself is bound to attract notice. I must have a successful career which would mask my true activities.... Also I must cultivate a personality. I modelled myself upon famous K.C.'s. I reproduced their mannerisms, their magnetism. If I had chosen to be an actor, I should have been the greatest actor living! No disguises--no grease paint--no false beards! Personality! I put it on like a glove! When I shed it, I was myself, quiet, unobtrusive, a man like every other man. I called myself Mr. Brown. There are hundreds of men called Brown--there are hundreds of men looking just like me....

"... I succeeded in my false career. I was bound to succeed. I shall succeed in the other. A man like me cannot fail....

"... I have been reading a life of Napoleon. He and I have much in common....

"... I make a practice of defending criminals. A man should look after his own people....

"... Once or twice I have felt afraid. The first time was in Italy. There was a dinner given. Professor D----, the great alienist, was present. The talk fell on insanity. He said, 'A great many men are mad, and no one knows it. They do not know it themselves.' I do not understand why he looked at me when he said that. His glance was strange.... I did not like it....

"... The war has disturbed me.... I thought it would further my plans. The Germans are so efficient. Their spy system, too, was excellent. The streets are full of these boys in khaki. All empty-headed young fools.... Yet I do not know.... They won the war.... It disturbs me....

"... My plans are going well.... A girl butted in--I do not think she really knew anything.... But we must give up the Esthonia.... No risks now....

"... All goes well. The loss of memory is vexing. It cannot be a fake. No girl could deceive ME!...

"...The 29th.... That is very soon...." Mr. Carter paused.

"I will not read the details of the coup that was planned. But there are just two small entries that refer to the three of you. In the light of what happened they are interesting.

"... By inducing the girl to come to me of her own accord, I have succeeded in disarming her. But she has intuitive flashes that might be dangerous.... She must be got out of the way.... I can do nothing with the American. He suspects and dislikes me. But he cannot know. I fancy my armour is impregnable.... Sometimes I fear I have underestimated the other boy. He is not clever, but it is hard to blind his eyes to facts...."

Mr. Carter shut the book.

"A great man," he said. "Genius, or insanity, who can say?"

There was silence.

Then Mr. Carter rose to his feet.

"I will give you a toast. The Joint Venture which has so amply justified itself by success!"

It was drunk with acclamation.

"There's something more we want to hear," continued Mr. Carter. He looked at the American Ambassador. "I speak for you also, I know. We'll ask Miss Jane Finn to tell us the story that only Miss Tuppence has heard so far--but before we do so we'll drink her health. The health of one of the bravest of America's daughters, to whom is due the thanks and gratitude of two great countries!"